

## Work Clubs and the Big Society: reflections on the potential for 'progressive localism' in the 'cracks and fissures' of neoliberalism

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### Abstract

The heavily derided concept of the Big Society has largely been expunged from the political lexicon. But its rationalities and techniques live on through a number of related policy initiatives to reduce state spending, discourage 'dependency', engage communities and promote pluralism of providers in local service delivery. This article looks at the experiences of, and outcomes from, one Big Society initiative - Work Clubs - in a large city in northern England. Drawing on qualitative interviews with Work Club staff and beneficiaries, it aims to locate practice within debates about the extent to which the Big Society is either a neoliberal 'flanking measure' (Jessop, 2002) or a potential site for 'progressive localism' (Williams *et al.*, 2014). The paper contends that both readings are possible. Work Clubs simultaneously challenge prevailing policy orthodoxies around punitive forms of welfare-to-work whilst remaining woefully under-resourced to meet the challenge of tackling worklessness in urban areas by alternative means. This suggests the need for theoretical frameworks of neoliberalism capable of critiquing the political economy of the Big Society and related initiatives without ignoring the progressive potential within.

Key words: Big Society, Work Clubs, neoliberalism, localism, worklessness.

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### Introduction

The current Coalition Government has championed 'decentralisation', 'localism' and the 'Big Society' as mechanisms for devolving power from central government to local communities (see DCLG, 2010; House of Commons, 2011). Described as 'David Cameron's core intellectual idea' (Lowndes and Pratchett, 2012: 30), the Big Society aimed to devolve power downwards to communities and establish a greater role in public services for voluntary and community organisations. It drew on the neo-Burkean notion of building social institutions from the bottom up with the 'little platoon' as the cornerstone of civil society (Davies and Pill, 2012). The 'Building a stronger civil society' strategy (HM Government, 2010: 3) identified the Big Society as having three main components:

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- Empowering communities: giving local councils and neighbourhoods more power to take decisions and shape their area.
- Opening up public services: the Government's public service reforms will enable charities, social enterprises, private companies and employee-owned co-operatives to compete to offer people high quality services.
- Promoting social action: encouraging and enabling people from all walks of life to play a more active part in society, and promoting more volunteering and philanthropy.

Initially seen as a something of an 'empty' concept (Kisby, 2010: 490; also Alcock, 2010), it later crystallised into a series of initiatives including the Localism Act (2011), the Big Society Network, Free Schools, the Big Society Capital Bank and the National Citizen Service programme (see Williams *et al.*, 2014). Among these, the Localism Act is seen as the 'backbone' (Lowndes and Pratchett, 2012: 31) of the Big Society agenda. It includes, among other things, a community right to buy local assets under threat; reform of the planning system to enable local people to shape new developments; and a 'right to challenge' to run local authority services (DCLG, 2010). The Big Society may now represent 'an embarrassing and outdated idea' (McKee, 2015: 6) for the Coalition Government, not least following the investigation of the Big Society Network for misuse of funds (NAO, 2014). Nonetheless, its underlying principles of volunteerism, self-help and devolution remain embedded in current programmes, most notably in the various provisions of the Localism Act. For this reason it remains salient to consider past and current interventions delivered under the rubric of the Big Society in order to understand the continuing operation and outcomes of similar initiatives.

This article looks at one Big Society initiative - Work Clubs - that has received scant academic attention. The Work Club programme was established in 2011 and provides guidance and a very small financial support for community and voluntary organisations to deliver non-mandatory employment support. This paper explores the practice of Work Clubs by drawing on interviews undertaken with Work Club stakeholders, staff and beneficiaries in a large northern city in 2013. The purpose of this exploration is twofold. First, it aims to explore the potential for progressive forms of localism within the 'cracks and fissures' (Williams *et al.*, 2014) of neoliberalism (Williams *et al.*, 2014). It asks if, and how, Work Clubs challenge or circumvent the approaches characteristic of mainstream forms of mandatory welfare-to-work provision. Findings suggest that critiques of the Big Society as a foil for neoliberal development do not fully understand the potential for local actors to offer alternative and valued forms of support that run counter to prevailing 'work-first' (Peck and Theodore, 2000a) policy orthodoxies. Moreover, these critiques overlook the scope for Big Society initiatives to be perceived and experienced differently accordingly to the policy domain in which they operate.

Second, the paper asks how these findings can be reconciled with the broader conclusion that Work Clubs lack the scale and resources to make significant inroads into worklessness in the case study area. It suggests that progressive openings are insufficient in themselves to change the prevailing political economy of welfare. Work Clubs are, in the final instance, little more than 'flanking measures' (Jessop, 2002) that ineffectually attempt to address the negative consequences of uneven neoliberal development. However, the paper argues that a distinction between 'diagnosis' and 'remedy' may help to ensure that the progressive openings apparent in local practice are not lost altogether in critical accounts of neoliberalism. In the remainder of the paper, a range of critiques of the concept of the Big Society are considered followed by a detailed outline of the Work Club programme and the research undertaken. Findings

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are then presented before the paper concludes with a discussion on their implications for critical accounts of the Big Society.

### Critiquing the Big Society

The notion of the Big Society has been challenged on a number of fronts related to both its discursive function and its likely impact in the current period of 'Austerity'. One of the primary concerns is that the concept and underpinning policies are effectively a Trojan Horse for achieving a long standing ambition to cut public spending and reduce the size of the state (Bailey and Pill, 2011; Kisby, 2010; Taylor, 2011; Lowndes and Pratchett, 2012; Wells, 2011). This process involves rescaling the governance and accountability of service delivery by delegating risk, responsibility and accountability from central government onto new subjects including local government, the private sector and local community organisations (Williams *et al.*, 2014). At the same time, the Big Society has been portrayed as providing cover for creating new spaces for market forces and profit accumulation that enable private actors to fill the gap left by state withdrawal (Lowndes and Pratchett, 2012; Flint, 2015; McKee, 2015). This has led, in some policy domains, to a fundamental redefinition of the relationship of citizens with the state and wider society. For example, Flint (2015: 40) suggests that the operationalisation of the Big Society through the Localism Act has served to 'dismantl[e] actually existing rights to affordable housing and occupy urban space.'

These critiques of the Big Society can be located within a broader tradition of scholarship on neoliberalism. Two points are of particular relevance here. First, scholars have identified a longer term process of 'neoliberalizing space' (Peck and Tickell, 2002) in advanced industrial economics that has seen the devolution of key government functions such as social welfare and urban regeneration to local administrations or non-state actors (Macleod and Jones, 2011; also Fuller and Geddes, 2008). These changes in neoliberalism's scalar constitution have been necessary to manage 'the perverse economic consequences and pronounced social externalities of narrowly market centric forms of neoliberalism' (Peck and Tickell, 2002: 388). Within this context, voluntary and community sector organisations function as Burkean 'little platoons' (Peck and Tickell, 2002: 390) that enthusiastically, but ineffectually, attempt to mop up the consequences of uneven neoliberal development through these 'flanking measures' (Jessop, 2002: 452; see also Brenner and Theodore, 2002; Gough, 2002).

Second, and more recently, the period of Austerity following the financial crisis of 2007-08 has been characterised as one when governments have sought to 'enforc[e] economy' (Peck, 2012: 632) through offloading the costs and responsibilities of fiscal entrenchment onto disadvantaged groups and areas. This process of 'making others pay the price of fiscal retrenchment' (*ibid.*) clearly resonates with claims about the function of the Big Society as a foil for state retraction from delivering public services.

As Lerner (2003: 511) observes, however, neoliberal scholarship has left 'a complete silence on the techniques of neoliberalism, the apparently mundane practices through which neoliberal spaces, states, and subjects are being constituted'. This silence can be perhaps explained by a tendency of scholars to privilege the role of structure, institutions or ideology at the expense of more situated, contextual forms of practice (Lerner, 2003; Ong, 2007; Clarke, 2008). Williams *et al* (2014: 2798) develop this critique further, arguing that 'hegemonic grammars of critique can ignore or underestimate the progressive possibilities for creating new ethical and political spaces *in amongst* the neoliberal canvas'. Conventional readings of the Big Society and associated policies as a 'smokescreen for radical neoliberal structural adjustment' (*ibid.*, 2803) thus neglect the potential for such policies to open up 'cracks and

fissures' for alternative and progressive forms of practice. Similarly, Levitas (2012) draws on Ricoeur (1981, 1987) to argue for the need to move beyond a necessary, but insufficient 'hermeneutics of suspicion' that unmasks the discursive function of Big Society as populist rhetoric cloaking class inequalities and dispossession. Instead, Levitas (ibid., 17) calls for a complementary 'hermeneutics of faith' that 'asks the question, what are the economic and social conditions under which these ideas would cease to be repressive, moralizing claptrap?'

It is in this spirit that the analysis which follows seeks to explore the 'cracks and fissures' opened up by the Work Club initiative. It seeks to adopt a 'hermeneutics of faith' to explore the progressive possibilities within a frequently maligned concept. In doing so, it responds to a call to make a distinction between 'symbolic impact and practical policy effects' (McKee, 2015: 6) of the Big Society. This is not to deny the importance of symbolism and the role of discourse but to suggest that readings of the concept also need to be rooted in its practical expression. It is to this end that the sections which follow begin to explore the practice of Work Clubs.

### **Getting Britain working? Researching Work Clubs**

Work Clubs are one of a suite of schemes introduced by the Coalition Government in 2011 as part of the 'Get Britain Working'<sup>1</sup> package of employment support available through Jobcentre Plus to individuals who have yet to qualify for, or be mandated onto, the Work Programme. The Work Club scheme seeks to encourage groups or individuals to set up local Work Clubs to 'address the needs of unemployed people in the community' (DWP, undated). Jobcentre Plus can provide very small amounts of financial support with start-up costs and setting up processes or systems but Work Clubs are largely expected to run autonomously without further financial support thereafter. The then Minister for Employment, Chris Grayling, explicitly linked it to the notion of the Big Society: *'Work Clubs fit with the ideals of the Big Society in seeking to encourage a wide variety of people, groups and organisations interested in helping their community prosper, to work together to support unemployed people in their area'* (Grayling, 2011).

Work Clubs were introduced against a backdrop of public sector funding cuts and welfare reforms that have radically reshaped the landscape of worklessness provision, especially at the local level. The Coalition Government either terminated, or did not replace, a series of area-based programmes or funding streams introduced by the previous government to tackle social and economic disadvantage at local or sub-local levels. This included the New Deal for Communities (NDC), the Neighbourhood Renewal Fund, the Working Neighbourhoods Fund (WNF) and the Future Jobs Fund. Instead, funding for tackling worklessness was largely channelled through the national welfare-to-work programme, the Work Programme, targeting those out of work for nine months or more. Thus despite their initial commitment to 'localism' (see, for example, DCLG, 2010), policies for dealing with worklessness have become 'strikingly centralised' (House of Commons, 2011: 15). Certainly, the Coalition Government have shown little enthusiasm for area-based initiatives (ABIs) in the current period of austerity (Broughton *et al.*, 2011; Lawless, 2010).

This radical reconfiguration of local provision provided an opportunity to look at how, and if, remaining provision could compensate for the loss of these ABIs. To this end, funding was sought from Sheffield Hallam University to work in partnership with the local authority of a large northern city to evaluate the impact of their Work Club programme. The city has been anonymised in this article because of the ease with which participating organisations could be identified. This could not only compromise the anonymity of individual research participants but also affect the funding

opportunities open to organisations prepared to provide open, and sometimes critical, commentaries of national and local policies on tackling worklessness.

Changes to local provision for tackling worklessness in the city exemplified some of the broader reforms already outlined above. Remaining funding made available through mainstream programmes including the European Social Fund (ESF), Troubled Families Programme, the Work Programme, and the Youth Contract failed to compensate for the loss of major revenue streams such as large-scale ABIs and the reduction in the Area-Based Grant.<sup>2</sup> As a direct consequence of these changes, annual funding available to the city council to commission and deliver worklessness provision through standalone ABIs or the area-based grant had fallen by around 80 per cent between 2008-09 to 2012-13 and, at the time of the research, stood at less than £1 million. Against this scale of cuts, the £106,500 made available by the local authority through the Work Club programme was miniscule, accounting for less than three per cent of the total amount lost through cuts to other funding streams. The local authority used this to fund 13 of the total of 55 Work Clubs operating throughout the city. Jobcentre Plus (JCP) also funded some start-up costs (up to a maximum of £3k) and some limited elements of delivery through the Flexible Support Fund. Work Clubs could then source other funding or use volunteers to sustain themselves.

Work Clubs typically provided a mix of pre-employment activities such as Information, Advice and Guidance (IAG); support with jobsearch, CV writing and job applications; training around areas such as IT, childcare, health and social care, first aid, food and hygiene, and Construction Skills Certificate Scheme (CSCS) cards; and volunteering opportunities. Some Work Clubs also offered more specialist support including workshops on building confidence and self-esteem; support and advocacy with non-employment issues such as benefits, debt, housing or mental health conditions; and English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) classes. JCP played no direct role in delivery but could support Work Clubs by referring clients, notifying them of appropriate employment opportunities or training them in the use of Universal Jobmatch.

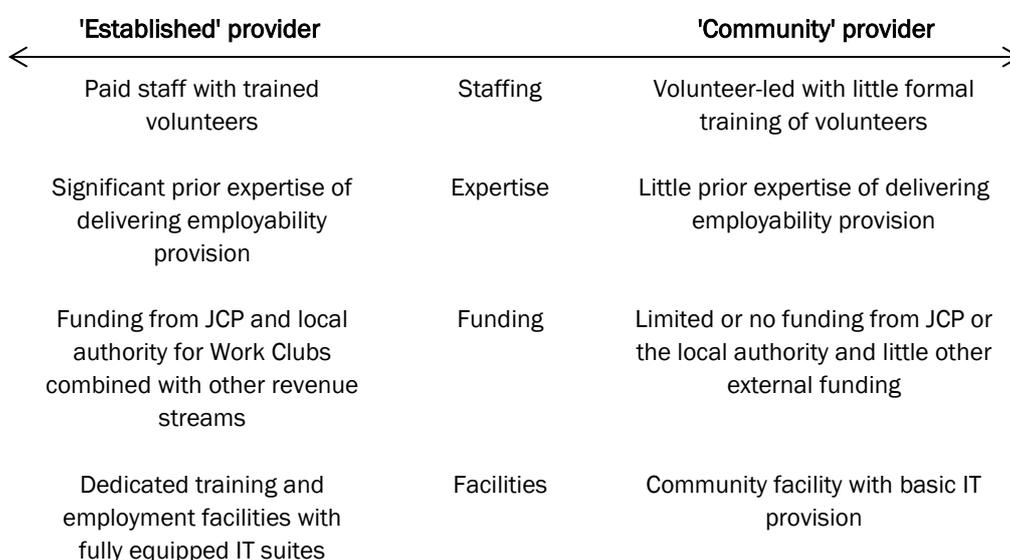
Between January 2013 and September 2013 a total of 30 interviews were undertaken with three different groups within the Work Club network operating in the city:

- Four stakeholders working for organisations that fund elements of Work Club provision including staff at Jobcentre Plus, the local authority and a social housing provider.
- 12 Work Club staff working across 10 Work Clubs.
- 14 Work Club participants.

Interviews were recorded alongside contemporaneous notes and summaries written up at a later point. The 30 interview summaries were then analysed using thematic categories which informed the original topic guide, with new categories added inductively through close reading of the data. This was presented in a report circulated to Work Clubs and key stakeholders on the outcomes and impact of the initiative in the city. This report was not disseminated to a wider audience by mutual agreement between the research team and participating Work Clubs. The main concern was that participants could be easily identifiable, even if anonymised, with potential implications for future revenue if seen to go 'off message' by key funders operating in the city and beyond.

The ten Work Clubs who took part in the research exhibited a number of common features including at least some shared aims, a similar core of activities, targeting of vulnerable clients, modest funding and the use of volunteers to increase capacity. However, there were also distinct differences. Work Clubs were delivered by a range of organisations from a major public sector institution through to specialist disability support organisations and neighbourhood-based community centres. There were also variations in terms of the source and level of funding, the balance of paid staff and volunteers, staff expertise, access to complementary provision in-house (e.g. training), and facilities. This meant that, in practice, there was wide variation in pre-existing capacity to deliver employment support within participating organisations. These differences are illustrated diagrammatically in Figure 1 below using two ideal type organisations.

**Figure 1: Ideal type model of 'established' and 'community' Work Club providers**



Organisations interviewed tended to lie towards one end of the spectrum between 'established' providers and 'community' providers although some shared characteristics of both. This can be illustrated by way of two examples. One Work Club that closely mirrored the 'community' ideal type was based in a community centre in one of the city's most deprived neighbourhoods. It received very limited funding from the local authority and was run by a volunteer whose expenses were covered through Neighbourhood Learning in Deprived Communities funding. Computers and ad-hoc IT support were provided free by a local housing association as part of a commitment to help local residents' access employment.

By contrast, one of the more 'established' Work Clubs employed two paid members of staff with employment support experience, supported by four volunteers who had received training in delivering Information, Advice and Guidance. It had a fully equipped IT and training suite. Most users were referrals from basic training provision provided separately on the premises with the Work Club serving as the next step in the route back into work. The organisation running the Work Club had received funding from both JCP and the local authority as well as a number of grants and contracts through major funding streams including the Big Lottery Fund and European Social Fund. The significance of this plurality of provision is explored further in the findings sections which follow.

## Findings: Practices, experiences and outcomes of Work Clubs

### *Locating Work Clubs in wider context*

This findings section considers the empirical evidence from interviews with stakeholders, staff and beneficiaries on experiences of, and outcomes from, participation in Work Clubs. It is important to set the context for these findings by first surveying the landscape of existing mainstream support. Scholars have identified a growth in punitive forms of welfare or 'workfare' (Peck, 2001) characterised by a move from 'creeping' towards 'ubiquitous' conditionality (Dwyer and Wright, 2014) as part of the neoliberal policy repertoire. This process can be traced back to Mandatory Restart interviews in 1986 (Convery, 2009) that first made receipt of benefits conditional on jobsearch activity. Since then, conditionality has intensified with mandatory forms of work-related activity extended to hitherto exempt claimant groups such as lone parents, the sick and disabled and, with the introduction of Universal Credit, part-time workers on low incomes (Crisp and Powell, 2015, forthcoming). This has been accompanied by the growing severity and use of sanctions for infractions of jobsearch commitments, particularly under the present Coalition Government (Watts *et al.*, 2014).

These policy shifts have been legitimised discursively by a reframing of the problem of worklessness as an individual problem caused by a lack of employability rather than a structural condition explained by a lack of employment (Dwyer, 1998; Peck, 2001; McQuaid and Lindsay, 2005; Peck and Theodore, 2000b). This recasting emphasises the deficient skills, aptitudes and motivations of the workless themselves (McQuaid and Lindsay, 2005; MacDonald, 2011). Such supply-side logic invites 'interventions towards activating underemployed segments of the labour force through training, job-readiness programming and unemployment benefit reforms that encourage (and increasingly compel) rapid entry into work' (Theodore, 2007: 929). This reading also sidelines the possibility of worklessness being explained by a lack of demand or by the poor quality and insecurity of available work at the lower end of the labour market (Beatty *et al.*, 2010; Keep and Mayhew, 2010; McQuaid and Lindsay, 2005; Theodore, 2007; Shildrick *et al.*, 2012).

Locating Work Clubs in the context of these broader workfarist trends is useful for reflecting on the extent to which they can be framed within wider critiques of neoliberalism. Interviews with Work Club staff and beneficiaries showed that the rationalities and practices were distinct from mainstream welfare-to-work provision in three main ways: the lack of a 'work-first' (Peck and Theodore, 2000a) approach, their non-mandatory nature and their capacity to engage with vulnerable groups. Taking each in turn, there was a clear attempt to demarcate Work Clubs from mandatory provision characterised by a work-first approach that is inattentive to aspiration and often concerned with enforcing attachment to unattractive work. Some Work Clubs did stress the primacy of employment as a goal, albeit using voluntary, flexible and bespoke forms of support to achieve this: '*The ultimate goal is to move people into work*' (Work Club leader). However, there was no evidence of promoting work at any cost. One Work Club leader underlined the importance of not 'pushing people into jobs they don't want'. Another also emphasised the broad nature of the support they provided which extended beyond employment-related support. They described, for example, how their service is 'not just a Job Club. It's somewhere people can come to if they need help with gas bills, electric bills or access to welfare rights. It's a holistic service'. The clear implication was that work was only one of a number of personal issues the Work Club sought to address.

Further departing from policy orthodoxy, some Work Club leaders emphasised the importance of supporting clients to achieve 'soft outcomes' that fell short of movement

into paid work. This was often the case with Work Clubs that targeted particularly vulnerable groups such as ex-offenders, individuals with mental and physical health conditions or disabilities, or those experiencing or recovering from addictions. For these Work Clubs, primary aims included improving health and well-being, reducing social isolation and providing support and advocacy around non-work issues such as housing and benefits. One Work Club leader reflected, for example that *'our clients need more welfare support than job seeking.'* Another suggested that achieving soft outcomes had become more of a priority because of an unforgiving job market that provided few opportunities to individuals with limited experience and low skills: *'For ones who have no chance [until the job market picks up] all we can do is make their lives a bit better. It's somewhere to come, drop in and see people. We can put them in touch with local activities.'* This claim was borne out by some respondents who valued the opportunity for increased social contact and peer support that Work Clubs afforded. One beneficiary described how: *'It is somewhere to go. I used to get pissed in pubs all day'. Another described how 'I'm not just stuck in the house. That can be boring.'*

A second point of differentiation from conditional welfare-to-work provision is the non-mandatory nature of support. On one level, this is a simple statement of fact. Work Clubs exist outside the obligations on statutory providers to set conditions for work-related activities and impose sanctions for non-compliance. However, it was also the case that the Work Clubs *explicitly* positioned their service in opposition to mandatory provision because of its perceived ineffectiveness and unsuitability for vulnerable clients. One stakeholder interviewed emphasised the voluntary nature of Work Clubs as the 'soft end' of employment provision in terms of being 'open-access, non-targeted, unthreatening, voluntary' (local authority stakeholder). This was often framed as a valuable alternative to mandatory JCP or Work Programme provision: *'It's less intimidating and a more relaxed environment. No-one's beating you with a stick saying apply for this'* (Work Club leader).

Beneficiaries responded positively to this approach as shown by comments on the value placed on the relaxed, informal nature of the centres where Work Clubs were based. One client spoke of how *'It is a welcoming place. They try to assist people into a normal life. Everyone deserves a second chance.'* The friendly, supportive approach of staff and the relaxed nature of Work Clubs was often compared favourably with the ethos of other, often mandatory, employment provision delivered through JCP and the Work Programme. Whilst individual advisers were sometimes praised, mandatory provision was criticised for a number of reasons including riding roughshod over aspirations, providing little practical support to find work and lacking contacts with employers. By contrast Work Club clients particularly valued the non-judgemental ethos of staff: *'I am more confident about being valued as a person'*. This clearly contrasts with the difficulties, bureaucracy and humiliations that mandatory mainstream approaches can generate as well-documented in studies on welfare-to-work (see for example Charlesworth, 2000; Peck, 2001; Smith, 2005; Shildrick *et al.*, 2012; Jones, 2014; Toynbee and Walker, 2015). It shows that Work Clubs deliberately sought to create a different ethic of care towards clients to that which is pervasive in some mainstream services. This reflects more broadly the distinctive role that the third sector can play in delivering employment support, albeit a role that is sometimes marginalised by the difficulties smaller third sector organisations face in securing subcontracts (Crisp *et al.*, 2010; Bashir *et al.*, 2013).

A third, and final, point of demarcation from more workfarist provision is that Work Clubs were also notable for their often successful efforts to work with more marginalised groups. This included ex-offenders, recovering substance misusers, the homeless and individuals with severe disabilities and mental health conditions. Practitioners often deployed patience and persistence to get clients even to just to

engage. One Work Club operating in a drop-in centre for the homeless reported the progress made with one highly vulnerable individual who had not worked for 25 years and who also had very low levels of literacy. He initially came to the premises for the drop-in lunch facility and, later on, to receive housing advice. He was a *'very quiet guy who never said anything'* but, after visiting the centre for some time, found out about the Work Club and expressed an interest. Since joining the Work Club he had attended employability courses delivered by another local provider and was benefitting in a number of ways: *'He's really enjoying the courses and his confidence now is amazing. From the first step he's come so far'*. The Work Club questioned whether he would have made this progress if he had not been able to develop the confidence and interest to join the Work Club at his own pace in an environment where he felt secure: *'If he had been sent [by an employment service provider] straight to a Job Club he would never have done it'*.

This observation is significant as it suggests that non-mainstream providers with the time and flexibility to work on a voluntary basis with individuals can make progress that might not happen if mandated by a mainstream provider. Indeed, it is precisely this commitment to a patient, unhurried approach that makes small-scale voluntary and community organisations ill-suited to delivering more workfarist forms of provision. None of the Work Clubs interviewed felt that securing contracts through the Work Programme was an option, despite this being presented as a possibility by national policymakers when the Work Club initiative was introduced. One stakeholder described this expectation as *'a dream'*. Work Clubs that had approached Tier 1 or Tier 2 contractors in the Work Programme had largely been rebuffed. Some felt that Work Programme providers were not interested in working with the third sector as the kind of intensive, specialist work they excelled in was not conducive to 'quick wins'. This suggests that Work Clubs were, in many ways, the antithesis of the modus operandi of Work Programme providers driven by a payment-by-results model to adopt a work-first approach. It may also explain why Work Clubs – on the basis of this research – have succeeded in engaging vulnerable clients while Work Programme providers have signally failed to support this group, leading to claims of widespread and systemically embedded *'parking and creaming'* (Rees et al., 2013).

### **The limits of Work Clubs as a Big Society solution**

The evidence presented so far shows that Work Clubs were able to depart from prevailing work-first rationalities. They also sought to create an ethos that was markedly different from mandatory provision whilst working patiently to support more marginalised clients. Thus far, there are some suggestions that Work Clubs operating in the 'cracks and fissures' of neoliberalism displayed elements of progressive practice. Certainly, there was an explicit recognition of the need to create a distinct and far more accessible offer than other conditional forms of welfare-to-work. This approach was clearly valued by participants. However, elements of progressive practice are not, in themselves, sufficient to insulate clients from the vagaries of labour markets with high levels of low-paid, low-skilled and insecure work. The discussion above largely relates to the *process* of supporting clients rather than the *outcomes* this achieves. The evidence on outcomes presents a somewhat different picture of success and highlights the limits of a focus on progressive forms of practice.

There were some valued outcomes highlighted by both staff and beneficiaries. Alongside movement into employment (discussed in more detail below) other employment-related benefits included accredited training (e.g. childcare Level 2 and 3 and CSCS cards), volunteering, enhanced IT and job search skills as well as increased awareness and understanding of job options. Nevertheless, there was little to suggest

that Work Clubs were able to support clients to circumvent the kind of low-skilled, low-paid work that predominated in the lower end of the labour market. Many of those interviewed had low levels of formal skills or qualifications which perhaps explained why their previous labour market experience comprised a string of low-paid, low-skilled jobs, often interspersed with spells out of work. Common former occupations among clients interviewed included bar work, catering, security, cleaning, labouring, driving and care work. Interviewees did not seem to feel that that Work Clubs could support them to acquire new skills or qualifications that would enable them to avoid occupations characterised by cycles of 'no pay, low-pay' (Shildrick *et al.*, 2012). For example, one non-UK national with experience of working in construction in his country of origin had limited English and no CSCS card. Consequently, he was applying for cleaning jobs because he felt that he had few other options: *'Everyone applies for cleaning. I know mechanics who are applying for cleaning because they don't have the language or CSCS card.'*

Perhaps more significantly, there was no indication that Work Clubs were able to deliver support on the scale needed to make serious in-roads into city-wide levels of worklessness. Monitoring systems across Work Clubs were of highly variable quality, used different metrics and were not quality-assured. This means that outcome figures should be treated with a fair degree of caution. Also, no attempt had been made to estimate additionality in terms of what might have been achieved anyway without the support of Work Clubs. With these caveats in mind, the figures do give some indication of the scale of the initiative and its outcomes. Set against overall figures for the city, the impact of Work Clubs in tackling worklessness is modest. The 11 Work Clubs for which data was provided only moved 118 people into work over a 12 month period between 2012-13. This was a time when the stock of Jobseekers Allowance (JSA) claimants within the city consistently topped 18,000. In other words, Work Clubs were supporting less than one percent of the total stock of unemployed into work. Of course, the stock is not a reflection of the total number of residents who have been claimants in this period because of constant movements on and off JSA. This is, therefore, almost certainly an overestimate of the level of outcomes achieved by Work Clubs relative to aggregate numbers of JSA claimants.

Interviews with Work Club leaders outlined some of the challenges they faced in supporting clients back into work that may explain limited outcomes. Many of these related to the characteristics of the Work Clubs in terms of where they lay on the spectrum of 'established' and 'community' providers outlined above. To recall, an ideal type 'established' provider has paid and experienced staff, a programme of support for volunteers, well-equipped facilities and the ability to draw on one or more separate funding streams to support Work Club activities. By contrast, the 'community' provider relies largely on voluntary staff with little prior experience of delivering employment support, volunteers who received no formal training, basic IT facilities and little or no alternative sources of funding to cross-subsidise Work Club activities. A key finding was that it was precisely these community providers - perhaps the epitome of the Big Society model - that struggled most to support clients. This manifested itself in three different ways.

First, they had to contend with a significant lack of resources. One Work Club leader operating out of a number of community centres described it as working on a 'shoestring', especially compared with the funding available through other provision such as the Work Programme. This had implications for facilities within some Work Clubs, for example, operating without telephones or, in one case, unable to offer users access to laptops when a concurrent IT class was running. Another Work Club run by volunteers described lacking the time to be able to develop partnerships with employers and training providers that could benefit clients. It also meant they could

only offer a drop-in service rather than develop a more structured programme of support.

Second, some Work Club leaders acknowledged their own lack of expertise in delivering employment support. One Work Club based in a community centre reflected openly that *'We're not clued up enough. We're learning ourselves'*. This included perceived shortcomings in providing generic employability support such as CV writing and interview preparation as well as specialist skills in supporting individuals facing particular barriers such as ill-health or disability. Whilst the local authority did offer some capacity building support this was sometimes inaccessible. Staff in outlying areas running community facilities could not always find any cover to allow them to attend training sessions in the city centre: *'It's difficult for me. I'm the only person here'* (Work Club leader). Combined with a lack of resources, this led to something of a vicious circle that precluded capacity building. Work Clubs most in need of training and support were least able to find the time to access available provision such as training for volunteers and networking events or workshops for Work Club leaders.

Third, and finally, support from volunteers was often seen as an asset but some Work Clubs, especially those with fewer resources, felt they could also constrain delivery. Volunteers lacking skills or experience in employment support were sometimes regarded as time-consuming to manage by paid staff: *'they can be more work than it's worth'* (Work Club leader). On occasion, they were also unable to provide a sufficiently high quality service, such as producing substandard CVs. Other issues included volunteers lacking IT skills and proving unreliable, especially if looking for work themselves and therefore not always available. Some Work Clubs also described lacking the time and resource to train volunteers to improve service standards.

Overall, the difficulties experienced by some of those closer to the community model led them to question the very notion of delivering employment support on a volunteer-led basis: *'It's not realistic that it could be volunteer-led. It's the result of the cuts, a Big Society thing. It's not realistic to expect people to step in and do paid jobs for no pay. Work Clubs are fiddling around the edges'* (Work Club leader). Another leader questioned the premise that Work Clubs could run effectively as low-cost options: *'They offer 3k [£3,000] for you to be a Work Club. That's nice [but not enough] if you are serious about wanting to move people into employment'*. Ultimately, there was a sense that some Work Clubs lacked the resource or staff expertise to provide a professional and effective service to support clients. The implications of these shortcomings for both critical theories of neoliberalism and calls for a more nuanced account of progressive localism are outlined in the final discussion section.

## Discussion

This article has set out to look at the practice of Work Clubs as a Big Society initiative. The discussion which follows aims to locate those forms of practice within debates about the extent to which the Big Society is either a potential site for progressive forms of localism or a neoliberal *'flanking measure'* (Jessop, 2002).

One of the key contributions of this article is to respond to the call of Williams *et al.*, (2014: 2798) to understand the *'possibilities for creating new ethical and political spaces in amongst the neoliberal canvas'*. Using this prescript, the article has suggested that the much derided notion of the Big Society as operationalised through the Work Club is far from an abject failure. From the perspective of staff and - perhaps most importantly - clients, Work Clubs deliver a valued service. Particularly significant is the way in which Work Clubs purposefully, and often successfully, configure practice in ways that oppose the approach of mandatory welfare-to-work programmes. This

includes a departure from 'work first' rationalities, nurturing an ethos of care in a supportive environment and a commitment to working with marginalised groups.

The value of non-mainstream, voluntary support, especially compared with more conditional forms of programming is well documented (see for example, DCLG, 2009). This is not a novel argument. The contribution of this article is to begin to use some of these findings to reflect back on the limitations of overarching critiques of neoliberalism. Specifically, it challenges dismissive accounts of 'little platoons' ineffectually mopping up the worst excesses of neoliberal development. It supports the observation of Williams *et al* (2014: 2807) that the apparent co-option of voluntary and community organisations into neoliberal structures of governance can actually lead to forms of practice which challenge established policy orthodoxies:

*The ethical performance of staff and volunteers in public and voluntary organisations can potentially rework and interpret the values and judgements supposedly normalised in the regulatory frameworks of government policy, bringing alternative philosophies of care into play.*

By delving into the 'cracks and fissures' of neo-liberalism we can deploy a 'hermeneutics of faith' that asks what the radical potential of such practices is. In this case we might suggest that voluntary, client-centred employment support can be effective in engaging highly marginalised individuals when delivered outside a work-first, payment-by-results model. In other words, there is an observed disjuncture between neoliberal forms of *policymaking* that seek to replace large-scale state support with voluntary endeavour and the resulting forms of *practice* which may run contra to other neoliberal aims such as enforcing attachment to work. It could be argued that this still fits with the critique of 'little platoons' delivering 'flanking measures'. But the departure of this paper from such logic comes in arguing that these 'flanking measures' should not be dismissed outright but, rather, explored in their own right as progressive alternatives that could be scaled up in different circumstances.

And herein lies another important point. The extent to which Big Society interventions have anything to offer by way of radical alternatives depends precisely on what they complement or supplant. In the case of housing, for example, the policies pursued through the Localism Act combined with effects of key welfare reforms (for instance, Local Housing Allowance and the 'bedroom tax') have the potential to undermine access to affordable social housing and create more precarious *housing pathways for vulnerable groups*. *In this respect, the reconfiguration of the 'social contract'* (Flint, 2015) around housing destabilises what was widely perceived and experienced as a public 'good' - namely affordable and accessible social housing that underpinned the 'rights to the city' of economically disadvantaged groups. Flint (2015: 51) contrasts this with past urban planning and housing policy informed by social equality paradigms that *offered an urban and governmental ambition greater than the emaciated goals of the Big Society*'.

The same cannot be said of employment policy in the UK over the last 30 years in terms of representing alternative and more desirable forms of policy and practice. The increasingly punitive and sanction driven benefits and welfare-to-work regime implemented over this period has been aggressively redefining the 'social contract' with its pervasive message of no right (to benefits) without responsibilities (to look for work of *any kind*). Against this backdrop, some forms of practice within Work Clubs could be considered progressive. Certainly, in contrast to housing, the progressive alternative is less obviously the restoration of some halcyon era of state-led support. Few would advocate, for instance, that expanding the role of Jobcentre Plus in employment provision in its current incarnation, for example, presents a desirable solution to the

limitations of the Big Society as a solution to the problem of worklessness. This suggests that care should be taken to distinguish between the impact and implications of the Big Society agenda within different policy domains.

Yet herein also lies the rub. The call to excavate Big Society initiatives for more progressive possibilities cannot ignore the very real limitations of the initiative highlighted by this research. It does not scale up into something which can in any significant way reduce aggregate levels of worklessness. This is particularly the case in the current political climate as funding for local forms of experimentation in tackling worklessness are cut drastically. And while highly regarded by participating individuals, neither does it appear able to provide a level of training and support to help them circumvent contingent forms of work in the lower end of the labour market. These are critical shortcomings. They expose 'the hermeneutics of faith' (Levitas, 2012) championed by some to be the dismissal as misplaced support for 'flanking measures' (Jessop, 2002) that do little to expose or challenge the wider political economy of neoliberalism and the spatially uneven outcomes it generates. The lessons from the past are apposite here. As Flint (2015: 50) notes, reliance on voluntary endeavour, mercantile philanthropy and self-regulation in the Victorian era 'exposed the limitations of these forms of governance and their inadequacies to grapple with the scale of the urban crisis'. A similar conclusion could be drawn here in terms of the limits of 'voluntary endeavour'. This article should not be read as suggesting that Work Clubs in any way represent a solution to the problems of entrenched urban worklessness in their current incarnation.

So how can progressive forms of practice be reconciled with these limited outcomes? One solution to this apparent impasse is to avoid seeing critiques of neoliberalism and calls to explore the progressive potential of practice within the 'fissures of neoliberalism' as binary opposites. 'Hegemonic grammars of critique' (Williams *et al.*, 2014: 2798) may provide useful *diagnostic* tools for understanding how ideology and policy have supported a distinctly non-progressive agenda of cutting public sector spending, contracting out public services to non-state actors and 'downloading' responsibility for dealing with the consequences of Austerity to lower spatial scales and forms of governance (Peck, 2012). The notion of the Big Society, and the policies which flow from it, clearly resonate with this analysis. But this analysis is not inimical to exploring the ways in which non-state actors interpret and implement those policies in ways that suggest progressive alternatives. A 'hermeneutics of faith' arguably offers the *remedial* tools to begin to understand the possibility for how neoliberalism might begin to be reformed or undermined from within its own structures.

This distinction between diagnosis and remedy opens up the question of whether it is possible to unify these concerns within a single framework that is capable of reconciling macro-spatial concerns with political economy with a micro-spatial sensitivity to the subjectivities of local actors under neoliberalism. Brenner *et al* (2010: 184) have proposed the notion of 'variegated neoliberalism' (*ibid.*) that offers the possibility of understanding processes of neoliberalisation as both '*simultaneously* patterned, interconnected, locally specific, contested and unstable [original emphasis]'. This offers a promising foundation for beginning to sketch out frameworks that enable us to critique political and economic developments without ignoring the progressive potential within each. This still leaves a glaring gap, though, that needs to be closed. Exploring the scope for progressive openings can easily sideline issues of power. It is not self-evident that highlighting examples of effective progressive practice in the 'cracks and fissures' of neoliberalism will encourage dominant political and economic institutional actors to depart from prevailing 'work first' orthodoxies. That this has not happened is perhaps testimony to an ideological concern to encourage plurality of service provision including large-scale private providers, combined with the 'production

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of ignorance' (Slater, 2012) around the causes of, and remedies to poverty and worklessness that serves a number of useful political functions.

The next step, therefore, is to better understand if and how the 'political and economic spaces' carved out at the local level can be scaled up to challenge established orthodoxies. In this respect, the growing trend towards devolution of funding and responsibilities to local authorities through, for example, City Deals and the Local Growth Fund, may provide some opportunities for more radical, larger-scale experimentation. Granted, this may do little in the short term to challenge the dominant policy nexus of mandatory welfare-to-work programming underpinned by a 'work-first' orientation and highly punitive sanctions regime. But in the longer term growing devolution of power and responsibilities to local and sub-regional actors may provide additional levers and alternative responses that can widen the 'cracks and fissures' in the neoliberal policy landscape.

## Notes

**1** The other strands comprise Work Experience, Sector-based Work Academies, the New Enterprise Allowance, Enterprise Clubs and Work Together. Details of these schemes can be found at <http://www.dwp.gov.uk/adviser/updates/get-britain-working/>

**2** Area Based Grant was a general grant allocated directly to local authorities as additional revenue funding. It was non-ringfenced and often used by local authorities to support interventions in their most deprived neighbourhoods. The grant was ended in 2010-11.

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